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THE NATURE OF PRAYER.

BY THE REV. DR. LYMAN ABBOTT, MONCURE D. CONWAY
AND THE REV. DR. W. R. HUNTINGTON.

I.

THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW will not expect from any one of its contributors a philosophy of prayer: only from each one some thought on prayer, some expression of his own experience, out of which the reader may, if he will, evolve a philosophy, or in which, without any philosophy, he may perhaps find an interpretation of his own experience.

Prayer is often treated as though it were an asking for things. Then the question is raised, Do we get the things we ask for? But prayer is something far more and greater than asking for things. It is communion. There is no better definition of prayer than Tennyson's

"Speak to Him, thou, for He hears, and Spirit with Spirit can meet—
Closer is He than breathing and nearer than hands or feet."

A boy comes to his father after breakfast in a great hurry. "Father," he cries, "give me a nickel to ride to school; I am late." The father gives him the nickel, and the boy darts out of the door for the passing car. Doubtless, that is a kind of prayer. He has a hard day at school; things go wrong; he suffers some real or fancied injustice; he is guilty of some lapses and neglects; he comes home discouraged. At night he sits down by his father's side before the fireplace, and begins to tell his father the story of the day. His father listens sympathetically; puts in, now and then, a question or a word of appreciation; but he is mainly silent, saying only enough to enable the boy to perceive that his father understands him. Then the boy goes to bed comforted, helped, cheered, ready to take up the next day's tasks with a new spirit. This also is prayer, and of a much higher kind. That this

is possible, that "spirit with spirit can meet," that souls have been cheered, encouraged, invigorated by such communion, is a truth as well illustrated and enforced by human experience as any truth on which we base our daily conduct.

But prayer is more than conscious communion with the invisible spirit of God: it is also expression to that Spirit. Adoration, reverence, worship, confession, all are prayer, even although the soul may not be conscious at the time of any response. Some of our prayers are letters which we write to express ourselves, and in the mere expression we find a succor or a gladness quite irrespective of any reply. To commune with oneself may be prayer. So at least the Hebrew Psalmist thought: "The Lord will hear when I call upon Him. Stand in awe and sin not. Commune with your own heart upon your bed and be still."

"My God, I thank Thee Who hast made
The earth so bright,
So full of splendor and of joy,
Beauty and light.
So many glorious things are here,
Noble and right."

That is prayer, though it asks no answer and expects none. It is prayer because it is the expression of thanks to one's Father; while Robert Louis Stevenson's

"The world is so full of a number of things
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings"

is not prayer, because it is only an expression of gladness, not of gratitude. But this expression of gratitude may be a prayer, even though it is not expressed to the All-Father, if it is really an expression of a grateful heart though to an unknown Benefactor. When Leslie Stephen, after his wife's death, writes to James Russell Lowell, "I thank—something—that I loved her as heartily as I know how to love," he is uttering a prayer, though he did not know it. I believe that the Father accepted the thanks, though the thankful heart knew not whom to thank.

There are two objections to prayer which the pastor often meets with, neither of which seems to me to be weighty. The first is the immutability and uniformity of law. This is equally an objection to asking anything of any one. In fact, it is the immutability and uniformity of law which makes nature do our bidding. It is because her laws are uniform that we can send the electricity to

do our errands or harness it to pull our trolley-cars. If in our comparative ignorance of nature's laws we can use her so effectively, why should we think that the Lawmaker cannot do so? The other objection is that God knows what we have need of before we ask Him. This consideration seems to me conclusive against a certain type of praying which is borrowed from pagan philosophy. God is not an unjust judge who can be moved to consideration only by importunity. He is not an absentee God who can be reached only by shouting. But the best gifts can only be given when they are asked for. It is generally only an added provocation to ill-temper to proffer forgiveness to an enemy who does not request forgiveness. It is usually worse than useless to offer unasked advice. Fathers, mothers and intrusive friends often make this mistake. The gift cannot be given unless it will be received; and it will not be received unless it is asked for.

But prayer is not only asking, communing and expressing life; it is also readiness to receive life. Listening to God is as truly prayer as speaking to Him. "Be still and know that I am God"—this also is prayer. Savonarola said that, in his time, the saints were so busy talking to God that they had no time to listen to Him. In our time there is danger that the saints will be so busy serving that they have no time to listen. Perhaps one reason why we do not get more answers to our prayers is that we do not wait in a quiet, receptive mood to learn the answer.

To sum all up: reverence, penitence, love, are the highest phases of our life. To express this life to God, to express it even to an unknown God, and to welcome the influence which quickens and inspires that life is prayer; and it is prayer, although the God may be unknown, and the expression only an aspiration.

LYMAN ABBOTT.

II.

A SCHOLARLY French publicist of warm religious sentiment was recently seized with a desire to inquire into the actual feeling and ideas of the people in his country with regard to religion. He travelled through many regions of France and had interviews with persons of all ranks, of both sexes, the rich and the poor. Among the many incidents that struck me in his report, one impressed me by its simplicity. In conversation with an humble woman at her wash-tub outside the door of her cabin, he finally

inquired what feeling or conception she had of God. She quietly answered: "He has never seemed to concern Himself about me, and I can't see why I should concern myself about Him." It is probable that, if this learned gentleman had inquired her sentiments toward her heavenly Mother, or toward some familiar Saint of the parish, there might have been less indifference or even none at all. There is little doubt that the philosophical and scientific discussions about the First Cause, the Unknowable and Cosmic Forces, have gradually formalized the exercises of religion even for the multitude, and that many of them have reached, albeit unconsciously, the phase of Voltaire's theism. Walking with a friend in Paris, and meeting a religious procession, Voltaire removed his hat. His friend said, "Are you then reconciled with God?" He replied: "We salute, but do not speak!"

When one has no longer any sect or system to build up, and is entirely outside of the competitive creeds, he is able to consider them all impartially, and is apt to form some opinion as to their respective relations to mankind. He will feel some tenderness for a dogma, however discredited by himself, which seems to console the human heart amid its sorrows, and to cause happiness in the home. The severe logic of modern theology, equally with that of science, carries the idea of deity into a region of ideas where salutation may be admissible, but not prayer. Is it logical to make any suggestion to Omniscience, or to propose any modification of action to Omnipotent Wisdom? Very few minds, however, even of those fairly educated, ever analyze closely such words as "omnipotence" and "omniscience," and the people generally have not been trained by the religious instructors to habits of exact reasoning. Prayer, therefore, has not been so much affected in that direction as by the immense developments of science, which has brought not only the leading intellects into the presence of universal laws, but gradually impressed the unlearned masses with the sense of fixity in outward nature. This is proved by the general transformation of the idea of prayer. There is now a sort of agreement among prayerful Christians that they should not pray for material things, but only for spiritual and moral graces. Of course, in moments of anguish and fear, in the presence of illness and peril, and in trials that move the heart and the affections, prayer for the beloved has a

character of its own, and is not consciously included in the general pious sentiment against prayer for material things. But this sentiment is the product of the advancement of science. The origin of prayer was to coax some being, as in remote regions the folk still coax fairies, for some material benefit. In eras when the best minds in the East believed that sun and moon and planets were lifted and conducted by angels, it was not incredible that the laws of nature might be suspended by some favorable agent. And even after those pre-scientific notions of nature had disappeared in more civilized regions, the angels becoming gods, the chief aim of prayer was to secure material things. Cicero and Horace maintained that men should pray only for things external, which are not under the control of man, but only of God; and that they ought not to pray for internal qualities—contentment, courage or any virtue—it being man's duty to secure virtues by his own effort. That view of those great and devout men is in striking contrast with the views of prayer now usually held by devout people—that is, so far as these devotional feelings in our time can be included in any general definition. In fact, however, every religious usage is connected with some larger system of faith and ethics which has travelled through the ages and gradually absorbed something from each one of them, so that it contains something for each separate heart. An ancient Persian prophet said: "The paths leading to God are as numberless as the breathings of created beings." There is a striking passage in George Sand, who says of her Pauline: "She found in Catholicism the *nuance* adapted to her character, for all the shades (*nuances*) possible are found in the old religions; so many centuries have modified them, so many men have had a hand in the building, so many intelligences, passions, and virtues have borne to it their treasures, their errors or their lights, that a thousand doctrines are ultimately stored in one, and a thousand different natures are able to draw thence the palliation or the stimulant suited to them."

The eagerness of theologians, ecclesiastics, eminent defenders of the faith, to harmonize their creeds with science, has militated against this interior multiplicity in every religious system. Eloquent divines bring their congregations into the presence of the Immensities. Protestant childhood is brought up on ideas of the worship of creative might and majesty:

"Great God, how infinite art Thou!
How frail and helpless we!
Let the whole race of creatures bow,
And pay their praise to Thee."

But why, O Dr. Watts, why should one bow to infinitude? Because we are frail and helpless? On that account we have need rather to dread any giant, especially when we see in the convulsions of nature intimations that the Power uses its strength like a giant. Add two centuries of experience, and Watts turns to Browning, affirming that

"A loving worm within its sod
Were diviner than a loveless God
Amid His worlds."

Assuming that prayer is real and sincere—not rhetorical, like that of a famous preacher which a gentleman declared to be "the finest prayer ever addressed to a Boston audience"—the prayer of those who have entered their closet and shut the door, one can hardly criticise such prayers any more than the songs of birds. One feels that here we pass out of the region where scientific theology declares that the Lord is in the earthquake, in the tempest and the fire, into a simply human region where the still, small voices alone are audible. I have reverence for these prayers of the simple, because I feel that the love in them is human love, and that they are really petitions to a heart like our own. They are unconscious relics of, and surviving witnesses to, the unsophisticated faith which abhorred evil and loved good, and recognized these in beneficent and in cruel nature the same as in human hearts. The petitions and requests and grateful expressions passing from one to another in the home and in the commune might pass to supposed invisible benefactors or enemies, just as to this day they pass in children's minds to Santa Claus. In Germany in earlier times Santa Claus was accompanied by a sinister form called *Klaubauf*. Santa Claus came with a great collection of gifts for the good children, but *Klaubauf* with a basket to carry off the children who had been naughty. This little judgment-day by masquerading relatives caused such terror and convulsions among the naughty ones that it was prohibited by law.

So far as the Cosmos imagined by science is concerned, the masses of mankind are children. They have inherited certain

forms of expression for certain feelings. Prayer is one of these. But in a country where education is universal old forms cannot always serve the spirit that originated them. The planet has wheeled into another intellectual and moral region, and the forms of antiquity have waxed old as a garment, and are consumed by the moth of doubt. Men no longer pray for what really concerns them, for the best gifts and blessings of the world. Temporal and actual things used to be prayed for, and they ought to have been, for it is with and amid temporal and material things that an individual mind and heart have to grow and embody themselves in fruit. The fact that people no longer venture to pray for what their hearts do secretly most desire,—what their whole energies are seeking every day,—but devote their prayers to vague and pallid sentiments, is a confession that this old form no longer represents the real forces which made that unceasing prayer which was in some sense fulfilled. It is essential to real prayer that it shall be made in perfect faith; that which is uttered with a doubt in the mind is no real prayer, but only a reverent gesture. The litanies possess literary, antiquarian and some poetic value; they are a kind of scriptures by which our sentiment is connected with that of the human family; and the increasing use of such litanies—chants and responses uttered by processions of monks and pious people, with fear and anguish in their hearts, in a time and region desolated by battle, murder and sudden death—implies the growing difficulty of extemporaneous collective prayer. The old liturgic phraseology and perspective being abandoned, public prayer has the attitude of expecting response and help from a supernatural Power,—a miracle, in fact. But as we have ceased to expect any miracle, of the old kind, that attitude seems to endanger the sincerity and the poetic elevation of the individual mind.

Saint-Beuve says: "There is in most men a dead young poet whom the man survives." I cannot help feeling that the fact that we must needs look into the past for our greatest poetry is due to the failure of Christianity to raise its conception of the universe, out of a discredited supernaturalism, into alliance with the real forces which are steadily mastering and bending the laws of nature to moral and human purposes. It is disheartening to think of a world growing prosy and pessimistic for lack of any such inspiration as that which filled the ancient Buddhists and He-

brews, although they had no vision of a life after death. In an early recension of Matthew, the Arabic, a beatitude reads: "Happy are the pure in heart, for they have vision of God." For how many millions has life been terrified by visions of God, not discovered by their own hearts, but forced on them by external authority? There are enough agonies and horrors in nature to justify the dogma that all evils are providential, while all the forces nearest the miraculous—learning, genius, enthusiasm of humanity—are engaged in a steady siege against nature. Thus is illustrated in our time the old saying, "*Laborare est orare.*" However much the old formulas and ceremonies may be preserved, the vision of God in the pure hearts will always be in exaltation of that same human heart. Before me is a poem written by an English lady in view of life's close, in which, after acknowledging her Father's "mightier order" in the giant forces of Nature, she writes:

"Yet, I beseech Thee, send not these to light me
Through the dark vale;
They are so strong, so passionlessly mighty,
And I so frail.
"No! let me gaze, not on some sea far-reaching
Nor star-sprent sky,
But on a *Face* in which mine own, beseeching,
May read reply."

Is this anthropomorphic? Ah, what a miracle is the human face! All that is mystical or poetic in the universe draws near to us only in that face. For multitudes, their life-journey is nearly all through a dark vale, and when the weary wayfarer hears in his dream a voice of early faith saying, "Seek thou My face," his heart replies, "Thy face, Lord, will I seek!" There can be no love nor prayer where there is no face. Never did heartfelt prayer ascend to the Unknowable. We ascribe faces to abstractions—Charity, Justice, Truth, Mercy—longing to give objective reality to qualities and sentiments we revere. But the source of prayer is deeper than reverence; it is love; and in the personified Beloved is imaged every face—of child, parent, lover, friend—that ever smiled upon that kneeling spirit, to be shaped at last in that face which lightens the Dark Vale with devotion and tenderness.

MONCURE D. CONWAY.

III.

THE essence of prayer is to be sought in man's instinctive longing for companionship. In most discussions of the subject, the petitionary element in prayer is emphasized to excess. Tyndall's famous challenge contemplated that side of it alone. But to make prayer merely a form of mendicancy is to degrade it. Prayer is primarily not so much an asking as a seeking. When it is affirmed of a certain Old Testament worthy that he "walked with God," it is only another way of saying that he had a habit of prayer. His temper was such that he could not abide isolation; he must have some one to walk with, and he found God. What we know, in religious terminology, as the kinds of prayer—confession, thanksgiving, request, intercession, adoration—all of them postulate access. Without the sort of contact which a poet has described as "spirit to spirit, ghost to ghost," no one of the several varieties could be put into use. In psychics it is true of prayer, as in physics it is true of force, that it acts only where it is.

Primitive man seems to have thought approach to the divine presence impossible apart from localization. This was natural enough. Mecca and Lourdes attest the survival of the feeling to this day; but it is steadily losing, both in prevalence and in intensity. Modern astronomy has given the death-blow to the shrine and pilgrimage doctrine of prayer. The likelihood that, in so large a universe, the Deity would confine residence to a few favored spots on the surface of so small an earth daily diminishes. It is becoming evident that the soul must be "full of eyes within," if it would really see God, see Him in his innumerable aspects, see Him as He bears down on all the sides of human life.

Here we touch what is incontestably true in the so-called "new theology." God is to be effectually sought, not at the ends of the earth, nor in the country of the stars, but in the background of the individual consciousness, that spiritual hinterland familiarly known as "the ground of the heart." Where the new theology errs, when it does err, is in confusing the personality of the seeker with that of the Sought. When contact becomes merger, we have pantheism pure and simple; but only insist that man shall stay for ever man, no matter how closely tangent to the God who is for ever God, and the more the intimacy possible between the two is emphasized, the better for the interests of religion.

Under the doctrine that "the all is God," prayer becomes nothing better than the echo of a cry. Under the very different doctrine that "God is all in all," it is found to be perfectly possible to pray. So much is St. Paul better than Spinoza.

Paul could no more have prayed to Spinoza's God than he could have seriously invoked the atmosphere. To Spinoza, on the other hand, Paul's conception of a God to whom one must "give account" was foolishness. Both men were of Hebrew stock, but it is easier to pray after listening to the Jew of Tarsus than after sitting at the feet of the Jew of Amsterdam. We "roll the psalm to wintry skies" with a vengeance, when every trace of personality has been washed out of our idea of God and Deity has come to be esteemed only as a more attenuated ether.

To concede, as I have already done by implication, that the petitionary power of prayer has limits, no more nullifies that power than does a like concession in the debate over free will compel acquiescence in determinism. A man's inability to do all the things he would like to do is no proof that none of the things he would like to do can he do. Christ's apparently unlimited promises of answer to prayer are found, under scrutiny, to have been carefully conditioned. On the other hand, the supposed demonstrations of the impossibility of any such answer, in view of the fixity of the "laws of nature," are less frequently pressed upon us now than they used to be forty years ago. There is far more reserve among experts than there once was as to the limits of the possible. Where it is a question of setting bounds to the Power that lies back of nature, the present-day masters of science observe a wise caution. It is for the most part the apprentices that make the noise. That there is anything that can, in the strict sense of the word, be called mandatory in natural "law," no competent scientific thinker will allege. Formulas are not commandments, sequences are not statutes. "Law" is a figure of speech when applied to cosmic processes.

The system of nature may be not unfairly likened to a Jacquard loom, of which the upper portion, where the perforated cards which regulate the pattern hang, has been concealed from view. Replacements and variations in that part of the mechanism would not be discoverable by the observer watching the movements of the shuttle down below; but, all the same, there would be departure from what, immediately before, had seemed to the looker-on the

inevitable sameness of design in the output. There may be some similar relation between the pattern of our lives, as worked out at "the roaring loom of time," and that night side of nature as respects which the wisest of us are agnostics. Answers to prayer may prove to have been in process of evolution, even while we were gazing at the wheels and levers of the huge nature-machine and crooning mournfully to ourselves the old refrain, "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be . . . and there is no new thing under the sun." Our ardent wishes are our most real prayers, and that men often see the fulfilment of these, either to their health or to their hurt, is matter of common observation.*

One more point in connection with the Christian doctrine of prayer may well be noted, and that is the stress which Jesus laid upon the importance of asking in his Name. There is nothing that at all answers to this in any other religion. The very uniqueness of the requirement gives it interest.

It seems childish to suppose that this condition of efficacious prayer is fulfilled by merely going through the form of appending to such petitions as we may offer the words "through Jesus Christ our Lord." As a matter of fact, we pray in the name of Christ, then and only then, when we pray in the spirit and power of Christ.

Praying in the spirit of Christ means praying filially, as He invariably did. Praying in the power of Christ means praying in what we honestly believe to be the line of God's purpose. The Synagogue shares with the Church the doctrine of the heavenly Fatherhood, and the Mosque approximates it; but neither in the Old Testament nor in the Koran do we find any such omnipresent recognition of and insistence upon the filial relation between God and man as pervades the Gospels. Lacking, as they do, the doctrine of the eternal Sonship, both Judaism and Islam fail to do full justice to the eternal Fatherhood. Alike with Hebrew and

* More people and more kinds of people pray than is commonly supposed. Witness the following extract from a letter lately received by the present writer from a negro youth earning the money for his next year's schooling by service in a "Summer hotel." "Aside from the kinds of work, the personal contact with different kinds of men has been also beneficial. Though there were men who were indecent in character, yet I saw men who dropped on their knees both in the morning and in the evening when they were going to bed and when arising. These men did not pretend to be religious either. They were ordinary men of the world. At this hotel I am rooming with a Spaniard, a Russian Jew, a Roumanian and an American."

Moslem, God is primarily King, and only secondarily Father. Under Christianity, God is King because He first was Father; the right to rule derives from the fact of parentage. The bearing of this article of faith upon the possibilities of prayer is manifest. Drawing near to God in the spirit of the little children who run down the path from the cottage to the roadway, intent upon pouring out their hearts to the father whom they see returning from his work, is a very different affair from presenting timid petitions at the lowest step of a secluded throne. In brief, the symbol of the heavenly Fatherhood meets and answers more of the difficulties which "the intellectuals" find in prayer than any philosophy of the subject has ever begun to do.

Praying in the power of Christ, I defined as trying, under his leadership, to get into line with the divine purpose. The ordinary mechanic who brings wonderful results to pass by his handling of the materials in which he works, does so in the power of the inventor who first found out the process. This is the order always—first, the discoverer, and then the great army of those who bring the discovery to bear and make it tell upon the multitudinous interests of human life.

The humblest drudge in the boiler-room of an ocean liner reaches the haven where he would be because he is working in line with those high intellects whose insight into nature's secrets first made steam navigation possible. In the realm of religion, Christ heads the list of the revealers; we pray in his Name, therefore, whenever, over and above drinking in his Spirit, we make a definite effort to utilize his Power.

WILLIAM R. HUNTINGTON.